# State of Tennessee
# Learning Agenda
# FY 2025-2030

June 2024

**TN** | Department of
**Finance &**
**Administration**

Office of Evidence
and Impact

# What is a Learning Agenda?

**A learning agenda focuses on building and using the research and evidence needed to solve big problems.** A learning agenda can:

- ✓ Prioritize key questions
- ✓ Spur coordinated evaluation and research
- ✓ Ensure results inform decisions

# The State of Tennessee Learning Agenda Aims To:

**Reinforce a focus on learning**
The learning agenda is not about giving a thumbs up or down on a program or policy for compliance purposes. It has the potential to spur evaluation and research identifying which approaches work, why, and for whom so the State can apply those lessons across contexts to improve outcomes.
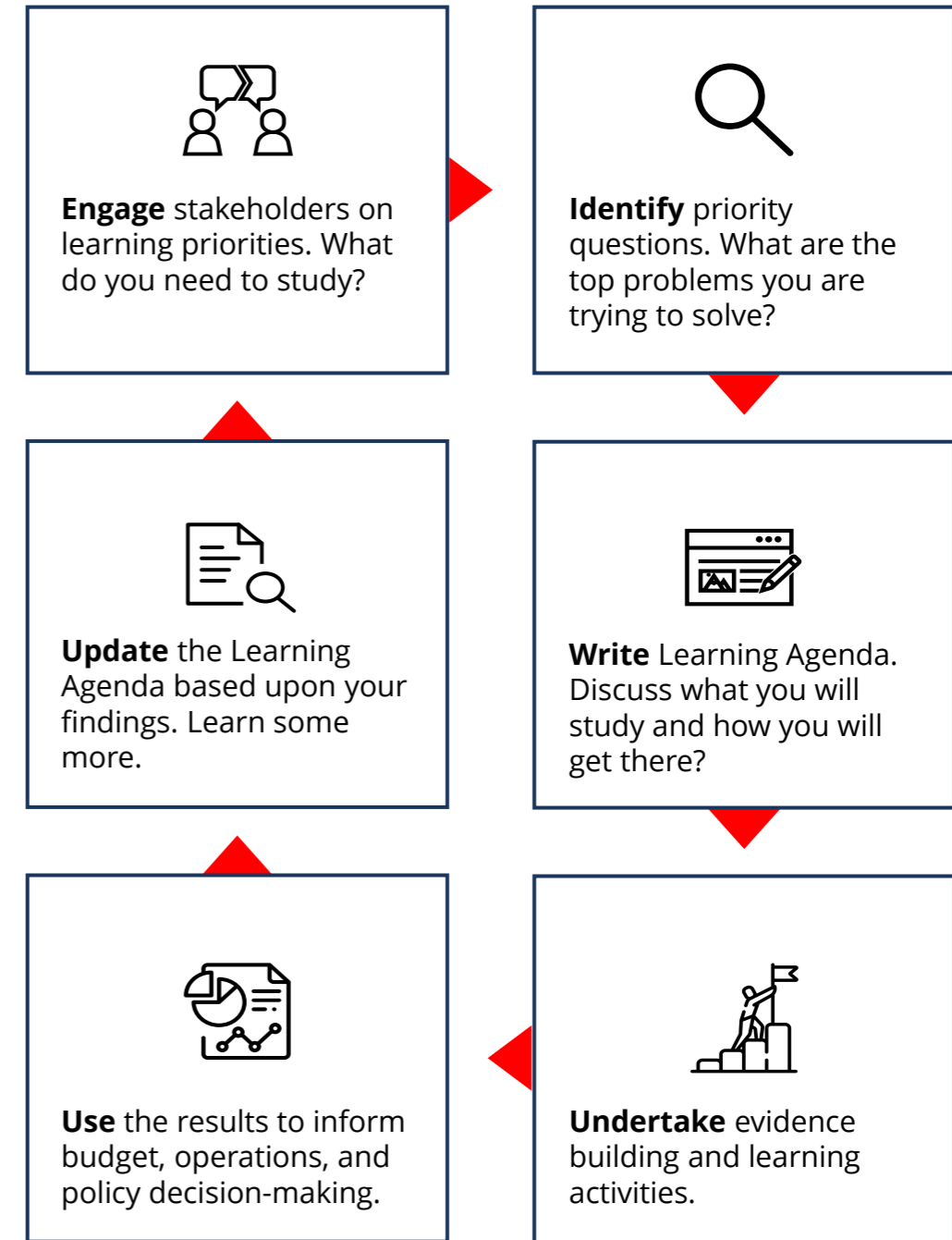
**Build Bridges**
Many of the most pressing issues the State faces do not fit neatly within the boundaries of a single government agency. The Learning Agenda provides an opportunity to coordinate learning and evidence-building across agencies.
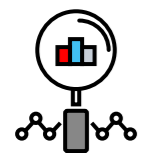
**Catalyze innovation beyond the State Government**
Many researchers, practitioners, and state and local leaders are piloting and assessing innovative practices and generating evidence to serve their communities better. Communicating a State of Tennessee Learning Agenda with key priority questions can drive coordinated innovation among research institutions and within and across state and local government agencies.

## The Learning Agenda Process

**Engage** stakeholders on learning priorities. What do you need to study?

**Identify** priority questions. What are the top problems you are trying to solve?

**Write** Learning Agenda. Discuss what you will study and how you will get there?

**Undertake** evidence building and learning activities.

**Use** the results to inform budget, operations, and policy decision-making.

**Update** the Learning Agenda based upon your findings. Learn some more.

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**The State of Tennessee's Learning Agenda is a strategic roadmap describing the specific areas where the State seeks to generate credible information in response to important short- and long-term strategic questions.** Credible information or evidence may stem from program evaluations, performance monitoring, literature reviews, policy analyses, and so on —and may be conducted or supported by different agencies within the State.

The Learning Agenda is the cumulative product of a prioritization process to identify information needed to achieve the State's strategic operating priorities. The learning agenda will stimulate various evaluation and research activities as we move forward. In response, Tennessee's Office of Evidence and Impact (OEI) will play a pivotal role in disseminating these research outcomes to state leaders, ensuring that the newfound insights are integrated into budgetary and administrative decisions.

## How You Can Help

**Anyone can contribute to help answer these questions, including you.** You might be a researcher, student, practitioner, industry expert, or state employee. You might be from a researcher or a state employee, from industry, a university, a community organization, or a philanthropy.

## What Are Learning Priorities?

The priorities are intended to focus on initiating evidence-building efforts, not to be comprehensive. On subsequent pages, each priority learning area identifies a goal statement, case for learning, and research questions. While the questions are framed within the context of Tennessee's state government, the Learning Agenda is open to incorporating research from outside the State Government, including insights from the private sector and other levels of government.

## How Was the State of Tennessee Learning Agenda Developed?

The Governor's operating priorities were used as the basis for which OEI identified initial questions in five focus areas to support the State's priorities. OEI met with each of the 23 state agencies to solicit input on specific agency priority programs and policies to help further develop and refine these questions. OEI received responses from several academics, associations, and non-profit organizations.

### How were the Learning Agenda questions selected?

The State of Tennessee Learning Agenda prioritizes questions that:

- ☑ **Advance one or more of the Governor's operating priorities**

- ☑ **Build on agency priorities**

- ☑ **Encourage cross-agency coordination for data access or evidence building**

- ☑ **Are likely to yield actionable and valuable evidence in a timely fashion**

- ☑ **Have relevance beyond the State Government and may engage the research community**

# 1. Education Quality and Access

☼ Ensure all children can access high-quality educational environments that foster academic excellence and success.

## Case for Learning

This priority reflects a comprehensive approach to improving education across multiple dimensions, including academic achievement, mental health support, and access to educational resources.

### Focus Areas

- **Scaling Literacy Programs**: Expanding early childhood literacy initiatives.
- **Summer Reading Program Effectiveness**: Evaluating intervention impacts.
- **School Funding Allocation Monitoring**: Overseeing TISA-based fund usage.
- **Supports from Behavioral Health Liaisons**: Enhancing mental health support in schools.
- **Career & Technical Education Impact:** Assessing technical education on outcomes.
- **Public-Private Workforce Partnerships:** Exploring implementation of collaborative efforts in workforce development.

## Priority Research Questions

a.  What state-wide and/or local early childhood literacy programs and strategies are demonstrating progress and can be effectively scaled to improve child literacy rates in Tennessee?

b.  What impact have summer reading interventions in Tennessee had on improving literacy-building skills and reading comprehension levels among elementary school students, and what factors contribute to their success or limitations?

c.  How are schools and districts utilizing the autonomy provided by the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement Act (TISA) to allocate funds, and what practices have shown to be the most effective in enhancing student outcomes and well-being?

d.  How have school behavioral health liaisons helped address students' barriers to accessing behavioral health services?

e.  How have career and technical education investments (e.g., Middle School CTE Coursework, GIVE Community Grants) impacted student outcomes?

f.  How do partnerships between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and government agencies enhance the effectiveness of career and technical education programs in Tennessee?

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# 2. Workforce Development and Employment

☀ Enhance the effectiveness of educational programs and workforce initiatives that foster employability and economic self-sufficiency in Tennessee.

## Case for Learning

This priority is informed by the need to create a skilled workforce that can adapt to the evolving economic landscape, ensuring that education and training programs are directly linked to employment outcomes and addressing the issues that prevent individuals from fully participating in the workforce across Tennessee.

### Focus Areas

- **Credential-Labor Market Alignment:** Matching certifications with job demands.

- **Labor Market Reintegration Barriers :** Addressing challenges for discouraged workers.

- **Workforce Reintegration Tactics:** Enhancing strategies for justice-involved individuals.

- **Public-Private Workforce Partnerships:** Exploring implementation of collaborative efforts in workforce development.

- **Incentives for Rural Professionals:** Examining attraction and retention success.

- **Rural Economic Impacts:** Understanding sector-specific effects in rural regions.

## Priority Research Questions

a. To what extent are Tennesseans earning credentials that lead to gainful employment in Tennessee's areas of need?

b. What programs and policies can the State implement to help individuals apply real-world experience, credentials, and prior credit-bearing work toward degrees and credentials that meet labor market needs?

c. How effective are state-funded programs, services, and practices targeting adult and non-traditional learners at increasing key employment outcomes?

d. What are the barriers that the discouraged worker[1] population faces in accessing services? What specific challenges do older discouraged workers face in Tennessee, and how can policies address age-related barriers to employment?

e. How effective are state-funded programs and strategies for reintegrating discouraged workers into the workforce?

f. To what extent are Tennessee prisoner outcomes (recidivism, labor market outcomes, etc.) impacted by the type, intensity, and duration of workforce development services?

g. What short and long-term impacts do existing recruitment and retention incentives have in attracting and keeping education, mental health, and healthcare professionals employed in geographically rural areas?

h. What effect does Tennessee's rural infrastructure (i.e., roads, housing, etc.) and service proximity (e.g., public transit, childcare, grocery stores, etc.) have on service professionals' relocation decision-making in rural regions of the State? To what extent are further investments or policy changes needed to make Tennessee's rural regions more attractive to high-need service professionals?

[1]A discouraged worker is a person of legal employment age who is not actively seeking employment or who has not found employment after long-term unemployment, but who would prefer to be working.

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# 3. Rural Development and Conservation

☀ Evaluate and maximize the impact of infrastructure investments in fostering economic growth, improving quality of life, and ensuring ecological sustainability in geographically rural regions of the State.

## Case for Learning

This priority is centered on establishing an evidence-base for comprehensive rural development. It aims to align development with the broader objectives of economic growth, community well-being, and environmental stewardship in geographically rural areas of the State.

### Focus Areas

- **High-Return Infrastructure Projects:** Identifying most beneficial investments.

- **Development Strategy Outcomes:** Comparing comprehensive vs. incremental approaches.

- **Internet Access Expansion:** Assessing strategies for broader connectivity.

- **Agricultural Land Preservation:** Exploring policies impacts of land use.

- **Freshwater Conservation**: Enhancing water management practices.

- **Solid Waste and Materials Management** Crafting systems to prolong landfill capacity and facilitate economies of scale.

## Priority Research Questions

a. Which types of state infrastructure investments have yielded the highest returns in terms of economic growth and quality of life in rural regions of Tennessee?

b. What has been the comparative impact of 'big push' investments versus incremental growth strategies in rural counties, and which sectors yield the most significant multiplier effects when targeted for development?

c. What indicators, frameworks, and methods can rural communities use to assess and balance their growth and environmental conservation to ensure long-term economic and ecological sustainability?

d. How have recent state policy changes and investments increased access to internet services, and who (i.e., demographics) have benefited most from expanded access?

e. How effective are state programs and policies (e.g., PACE, TAEP) at mitigating the negative economic and cultural impacts of agricultural land loss?

f. How do specific zoning policies contribute to agricultural land loss in Tennessee, and what changes could mitigate this trend while balancing housing and development needs? How does converting agricultural land into suburban developments impact local communities, particularly in terms of economic and social well-being outcomes?

g. What is the role of population growth, development patterns, agricultural methods, pollution, and industry growth in the availability of freshwater resources? What efforts can the state take to mitigate any negative effects of these trends to ensure all residents have access to fresh water while preserving the state's economic vitality?

h. What is the influence of best management practices (BMP) on water quality in Tennessee? What role can the state have in working with environmental and industry groups to promote the use of these best practices?

i. What role can state government play to prolong landfill capacity through effective waste diversion methods (e.g., recycling, composting, agricultural/industrial byproducts, etc.)? How can rural and/or distressed county governments tap into economies of scale (e.g., interlocal agreements/partnerships) to assist with high-cost problem wastes (e.g., scrap tires) and prevent illegal dumping? How will the treatment/mitigation of emerging contaminant pollution (PFAS, etc.) impact rural counties?

# 4. Strong Families and Communities

☀ Enhance the stability and well-being of families and communities across Tennessee by addressing challenges within child welfare, juvenile justice, healthcare, and housing.

## Case for Learning

This priority acknowledges the interrelated nature of these areas and seeks to leverage cross-sector collaboration and evidence-based policymaking to promote positive outcomes for Tennessee's families and communities.

### Focus Areas

- **Accelerating Foster Care Permanency:** Streamlining processes for child stability.

- **Strengthening Family Reunification**: Supportive measures for family restoration.

- **Tailored At-Risk Youth Support**: Customized assistance for vulnerable adolescents.

- **Improving Youth Behavioral Intervention**: Developing proactive strategies for early behavioral challenges.

- **Enhancing Quality Childcare Access**: Evaluating and broadening childcare availability and quality.

- **TennCare Maternal Benefits Expansion Impact:** Assessing mother and child wellness outcomes.

- **Healthcare Services Comparison**: Analyzing public vs. private sector efficacy for underserved communities.

- **State-Funded Housing Program Efficacy**: Ensuring housing initiatives meet vulnerable populations' needs.

## Priority Research Questions

a. What factors negatively impact the timeline to permanency for children in foster care, and what reforms can streamline these processes while ensuring child safety?

b. What are the key factors contributing to successful family reunification, and how can support services be optimized to address these factors effectively?

c. How effective are current policies, services, and programs at identifying and tailoring support to youth's specific needs with placement decisions based on individual risks and treatment needs?

d. What specific supports and services are in place for dually involved youth receiving services from both child welfare and juvenile justice systems? What specific improvements need to be made in coordination among state agencies to ensure consistency and accountability in achieving outcomes of interest?

e. How effectively are state agencies facilitating collaboration across education, health, and justice system actors to identify youth behavioral challenges early and prevent future court involvement?

f. What are the main barriers to accessing quality childcare in Tennessee, and how can these barriers be addressed through policy and investment?

g. How do State and local childcare policies and regulations reflect and affect the experiences of home-based childcare providers? In what ways do the childcare policies and regulations exclude or include providers?

h. How has the expansion of TennCare maternal benefits affected the health outcomes for mothers and infants?

i. To what extent do the medical and dental facilities/services offered by the State health department overlap with those provided by private medical care providers? How does the quality of care, affordability, and patient outcomes compare between public health department facilities and private providers in low-income and rural communities?

j. How effectively are existing State-funded housing programs meeting the diverse housing needs of older adults, disabled, formerly incarcerated, individuals living with mental illness, and rural residents?

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# 5. Government Efficiency and Effectiveness

Improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness of state agencies through the adoption of effective policies, cutting-edge technology, and the use of efficient methodologies.

## Case for Learning

This priority aims to reinforce the State's commitment to continuous improvement and innovation within state operations, prioritizing efficient management, fiscal responsibility, responsive customer service, and the strategic use of emerging technologies to serve the public interest.

### Focus Areas

- **Performance System Refinement:** Enhancing decision-making and effectiveness.
- **Technological Upgrade Evaluation:** Cost-efficiency of real-time data tracking.
- **Improve IT Return on Investment:** Assessing causes and solutions in state IT projects.
- **Customer Service Improvement:** Streamlining service and increasing engagement.
- **User-Centric Tech Adoption:** Integrating AI within regulatory frameworks for citizen services.
- **Housing Needs and Decision-Making Process Alignment:** Review of decision-making criteria used in determining both the type and where housing is developed.

## Priority Research Questions

a. What are the best practices (e.g., PerformanceStat, policies, technology, processes, or methodologies) that the State agencies should utilize to ensure that performance management and data systems improve decision-making to benefit the operations and mission at multiple levels of the organization?

b. What is the feasibility and cost associated with developing the infrastructure and processes (e.g., system modernization, paper file digitization, novel data collection) needed to generate real-time monitoring data/indicators for critical service areas (e.g., economic, labor and workforce, childcare) in the State?

c. What are the underlying factors and systematic mechanisms contributing to cost overruns in large-scale state IT projects, and how do these factors interact with project planning, execution, and vendor management to affect return on investment?

d. What are the best practices for increasing customer engagement, eliminating ineffective touchpoints and duplicative requests, and streamlining service referrals to other agencies and resources that are most cost-effective?

e. How can state agencies integrate user-centric design and advanced technologies (e.g., generative AI) to tailor services that meet citizens' needs, considering the constraints of regulatory and policy adherence?

f. What changes to process, policy, or capacity are needed to improve how location is prioritized in housing development to ensure that the right type of housing is built in appropriate locations?

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## What is next for the State of Tennessee Learning Agenda?

OEI is working closely with agencies to initiate and support evidence-building, research activities, and evaluations to support this Statewide Learning Agenda and encourage agencies to develop their own Learning Agendas. OEI has already begun implementing the Learning Agenda by seeking answers the questions posed. OEI intends to share an annual update on the State's Learning Agenda efforts.

## How You Can Help

You can help contribute to answering these questions, whether you are a researcher or a state employee, from industry, a community organization, or a philanthropy.

❑ **Join** efforts to create research that is shared with and used by decision-makers in government

❑ **Share** your research, thoughts, or questions by emailing oei.research@tn.gov

❑ **Join** the evidence infrastructure of the State Government as a program evaluator, data scientist, research director, or program coordinator as an employee: www.tn.gov/careers/

❑ **View** OEI's website and other resources at www.tn.gov/finance/oei